

end. I think this legislation will be strongly supported by a bipartisan majority in the Senate. It was reported out of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in June on a strong bipartisan basis.

We must understand, it has been many months since the committee action took place. I hope we can take a limited number of amendments with very short time agreements and have it set up so that when we get back here, when the elections are over, this would be the first order of business we move to. We could set it up that we can finish the bill—it will be a very long day—but do it in 1 day.

I believe we should do this, this important legislation. Passage means a lot to our vitally important United States—India relationship. I pledge to do what I can to ensure that we do just that. I hope before we leave here today, tomorrow, or Sunday—whenever it might be—that we will have this bill on so-called automatic pilot, that we can take this up when we get back. I hope that will be the case.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. 3994

Finally, on the Iran matter, I hope we can do something on that bill. As the Republican leader said last night, I couldn't think of a worse time for this Iranian matter to lapse. So I now ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the consideration of S. 3994, a bill to extend the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 until November 17, 2006; that the bill be read a third time, passed, and the motion to reconsider be laid upon the table.

If we did this, it would put everything in order until that date. It would extend this matter until then. The House has put a lot of other stuff in this bill very recently. There have been no hearings on it. I think it would be in the best interest of the country if we did this. I hope we can. If the leader cannot agree to this request now, I hope we can do it at a subsequent time before we leave in the next few days.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader.

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, did the Senator make a unanimous consent request?

Mr. REID. Yes.

Mr. FRIST. Reserving the right to object, and I will object, I saw for the first time 10 seconds ago what the minority leader has proposed.

I had a unanimous consent request that we proceed to the bill the House passed last night when we started the discussion, and this is a continuation and a response to the fact that we do have to act today.

What I prefer to do is work through the bill the House already passed, H.R. 6198, which has been received from the House. But what we can do is for us to get together and see how best to address this matter, either with the approach the Democratic leader put forward or the approach that I think is much better and much more complete, the House bill.

So I object to his unanimous consent request. Rather than go through the formal unanimous consent request on the House bill, which I have before me, why don't we try to address it.

Mr. REID. I withdraw my request.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The request is withdrawn.

Mr. FRIST. On the India Nuclear Act, it is something we are working on. I believe we do need, before we leave, to put together a package, as the Democratic leader and I have been working toward, something along the order of a day, as he mentioned. Both of these issues are very important. I brought them up last night and we do need to act on those today.

Mr. President, in closing, I wish to say this is a good example. There is going to be a lot happening over these next 24 hours. If we can work through these matters and we can receive the final legislation to be considered on the floor, legislation such as homeland security and port security, I think we will be able to act in a fairly expeditious manner. The clock will run on the border fence bill until 3 a.m. That is when the vote would occur. If, through working together, we are able to manage things in a more orderly way, we will be able to do that.

Following that vote, we have one more vote on child custody protection. Again, these are issues that are very important, but we will do our best working together to get things as coordinated as we possibly can, given some legislation isn't quite ready yet for the floor.

With that, I hope everybody will be very patient over the next 24, 36 hours, and then we will have everybody out and have our Nation's business done.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Idaho is recognized.

VETERANS

Mr. CRAIG. Mr. President, I come to the floor this morning to seek recognition to speak about something that is very important to Congress and the American people, and that is the issue of the state of veterans affairs in this country.

The Senate on Wednesday heard from the Senator from Washington an episode so designed and delivered by her that would suggest that this Congress has ignored and done little to help America's veterans, both current and in the sense of Afghanistan and Iraq, those future veterans. I simply do not agree and take issue with her characterization of the record of the Bush administration and this Republican-led Congress when it comes to caring for America's veterans. In my capacity as chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, I take issue with her suggestion that Congress has done nothing in its job to demand accountability out of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

I must suggest it is not surprising that a month removed from a midterm election our Democratic colleagues are

leveling accusations against a Republican-led Congress that it has failed to hold the Bush administration accountable for a host of issues. Let's remember, it is a political season and the statements made on the floor Wednesday about veterans and veterans affairs is very politically charged.

I have no trouble with tough oversight and accountability and finding answers to serious problems, but to consistently suggest that the sky is falling while leaving out any whiff of praise or any good that has been accomplished is very political at best and it is a disservice to our veterans and the thousands of dedicated VA employees who care for them.

The speech of the Senator from Washington regarding VA provides a very clear example of what I mean. During her speech, the Senator from Washington highlighted a recently released GAO report that confirmed the problems VA encountered in its formulation and execution of its budgets in fiscal years 20005 and 2006 that ultimately led to the Bush administration—that is right, this administration—and this Congress asking for a supplemental funding of \$3 billion.

From that report, she drew her own conclusions—in my view unsubstantiated conclusions—that the VA had misled and even lied to Congress about the veracity of its budget requests. Then she demanded accountability, as if it were nonexistent. I am here to tell my colleagues of the steps that have been taken to establish that accountability that is there and very clear today.

As soon as we learned of last year's budget shortfall, I called hearings and we got answers. The answers all of us received from the VA at that hearing and then in subsequent oversight hearings were what the GAO reported—that they were following much of what was being done to establish greater credibility. More importantly, what the Senator from Washington left out of her rendition of the GAO's report was that VA had already implemented nearly all of the GAO's recommendations prior to submission of its fiscal year 2007 budget in February.

Solutions to a problem were identified and implemented long ago, and that is why our VA is functioning as well as it is today. Also, based upon when we learned during our oversight hearings, we required VA to submit quarterly reports on budget execution. We have received three such reports this year. VA officials made themselves available to Members, to the staff, Republicans and Democrats alike.

We have historically operated the Veterans' Affairs Committee in a very bipartisan way, and it is beyond the pale that it appears we are now into partisan attacks just prior to the election.

Furthermore, for anyone interested in learning the facts about how VA is holding itself accountable for performance, you need to look at the record.

Just open up the VA's budget documents and you will see a host of performance measures that show a degree of institutional accountability that is the envy of other Government agencies and roundly praised by independent observers. Let me tick off a few of those performance measures, and as I am doing so, please be mindful of how the improvements in these areas during the Bush years have impacted the lives of veterans.

The percentage of patients who report being seen within 20 minutes of scheduled appointments by the VA care facilities has improved from 65 percent in 2002 to 73 percent through the end of last year.

The percentage of primary care appointments scheduled within 30 days of the desired date has improved from 89 percent in 2002 to 96 percent through the end of last year.

The percentage of specialty care appointments scheduled within 30 days of the desired date have improved from 86 percent in 2002 to 93 percent this year.

The number of veterans the VA treats in noninstitutional, long-term care settings has increased by 50 percent since 2002.

And the list goes on and on and on.

In 2004, the Rand Corporation examined why VA patients get better chronic preventative care than similar U.S. audits. The answer? Rand concluded that the VA's edge is linked to improved information technology, tracking of performance, and accountability. And that is when in these charts this kind of recognition began to take over. All of this was ignored in the speech by the Senator from Washington. So let's look at some of those facts.

Washington Monthly is not necessarily a publication that constantly praises the Bush administration, but it says VA care is the "best care anywhere"—a tremendous statement and a very fine article about the phenomenal increases in quality health care delivered by the Veterans' Administration over the last number of years.

That is not the end of that story. Here is another part of that story, and this comes from not a Washington publication but from Time magazine. It goes on to say in this article how VA hospitals have become the best in the Nation. It says that for the sixth year in a row—let's backtrack to the Bush administration. I think they have been around a few years, maybe 6 or more. VA hospitals last year scored higher than private facilities on the University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index. The VA scored 83 out of 100. Private institutions scored 71 out of 100. That is a pretty good record. In fact, it is the best record in the United States.

Now, what did BusinessWeek magazine say about it? They said something very similar. They said that 154 hospitals and 871 clinics run by the Veterans' Administration have been ranked best in class by a number of independent groups on a broad range of

measures from chronic care to heart disease treatment, and on and on. The VA's prescription for accuracy rates is greater than 99.97 percent. That is the rest of the story, and it is a mighty important story.

Now, let me talk just a few minutes about money because I think that is part of why we are as successful as we are, but it is also a phenomenal statement of this Congress—yes, a Republican-led Congress—and this administration's commitment to America's veterans. What are those accomplishments during the Bush years? Let me list a few.

With enactment of the 2007 budget, VA's health care budget will have increased 70 percent during the Bush years. Look at the numbers. Here they are. Those are undeniable. Those, in fact, are facts. They are budgetary facts. It is one of the fastest growth rates and increases in budget in any other area except defense in a time of war in this period of budgeting of the U.S. Government. Has a Republican-led Congress turned its back on American veterans? Quite the opposite.

The GI bill educational benefits for veterans has been boosted by 65 percent, raising the lifetime benefit from \$23,400 to \$38,700.

A new educational program was created for members of the Guard and Reserve activated after September 11, 2001, providing up to \$39,960 in lifetime benefits.

The educational benefit for survivor and dependents of vets has been increased by 46 percent.

The maximum VA home loan guarantee has been increased by 107 percent.

The largest expansion of the National Cemetery System since the Civil War is currently underway.

Historic legislation was enacted to permit certain disabled veterans to receive their disability and military retirement benefits concurrently.

Comprehensive legislation was enacted to update and strengthen civilian protection available to members of the Armed Forces.

Comprehensive legislation was enacted to improve job training and placement services for veterans.

A new insurance program was created to provide immediate benefits—payments of between \$25,000 to \$100,000 to servicemembers who have been traumatically injured since the beginning of the war on terror. Mr. President, 2,700 injured veterans have received that benefit.

That is the record. That is the record, and that is the one this Congress and this President have responded to in a most timely and, more importantly, responsible fashion.

Now that I think the record is clear, what are some of the other answers?

Well, some on the other side would say it is money, money, money, and more money. We have found it is quite the opposite. It is making the system we have work more efficiently, more

responsibly. We are now reshaping VA to handle the high-tech problems it has had, or the informational problems it has had, to make sure we secure the names and the lists and the informational flow of our veterans and their backgrounds. I am extremely proud of the work we have done, and we have done it in a bipartisan way.

So why now, in the late hours of this year, are we all of a sudden hearing all of these things that are what I believe to be improper statements about the Veterans' Administration? Well, I think we have to recognize what is at hand. It is a political year. But there is something we have never done; that is, politicize veterans or politicize our military. And we shouldn't start now.

Our record is strong. Our support of veterans has always been there. I have given my colleagues the facts and the numbers. I am proud of the accomplishments we have made this year alone, a near 14 percent increase in veterans health care or veterans budgets in general. There is no other agency of our Government except Defense that has had that kind of an increase.

So let's recognize what the year is all about. It is politics and it is political. What I have given my colleagues is a factual accounting of the great successes we have had in veterans affairs, with veterans, delivering service to veterans. That doesn't mean we are perfect and it doesn't mean every veteran got exactly what they wanted the moment they asked for it. That will never exist. But we will be responsive. We do care. And the expression on the part of this Congress, this President, and the American taxpayer in relation to the support of our veterans is, in fact, unprecedented.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Who yields time?

Mr. CRAIG. Mr. President, I note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. ISAKSON). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, I believe it is time to close morning business.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator is correct. Morning business is closed.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2007—CONFERENCE REPORT

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the hour of 10 a.m. having arrived, the Senate will resume